



# Colloquium Brief

Strategic Studies Institute

*U.S. Army War College and  
21st Century Defense Initiative  
of The Brookings Institution*



## COIN OF THE REALM: U.S. COUNTERINSURGENCY STRATEGY

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### KEY INSIGHTS:

- Regardless of whether counterinsurgency (COIN) will be the dominant form of military activity in the future or simply one of several, the United States needs an effective national strategy which explains when, why, and how the nation should undertake it.
- The basic assumptions of the current approach need revisited, especially those dealing with the role of the state, the strategic framework for American involvement, and the whole-of-government approach.
- Given the demands placed upon the armed forces by the current campaigns, most of the effort has been on tactics, training, and doctrine. Ultimately strategic transformation is at least as important if not more so.
- Rather than thinking of counterinsurgency and warfighting as competing tasks, the military and other government agencies must pursue ways to integrate them, thus assuring that the United States can address the multi-dimensional threats which characterize the contemporary security environment.

The “Future Defense Dilemmas” seminar series is a new partnership between the 21st Century Defense Initiative at the Brookings Institution and the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute. Its goal is to bring together defense experts and policy leaders from academia, the military and defense community, other governmental organizations, and nongovernmental institutions for discussions on looming defense questions and dilemmas.

On October, 22, 2007, the 21st Century Defense Initiative and the Strategic Studies Institute launched the Future Defense Dilemma series with a day-long seminar entitled “COIN of the Realm: U.S. Counterinsurgency Strategy.” This was inspired by the recent U.S. military experience in Afghanistan and Iraq and the subsequent renewed interest in COIN. This has far-reaching effects on military doctrine, education, training, knowledge management, force structure planning and personnel management, as research, development, and acquisition priorities. In a very real sense, the U.S. military of the future will be shaped by efforts to become more effective at counterinsurgency. Given this wide-ranging and deep impact, the seminar explored two key questions: (1) Is the United States pursuing and executing the right strategy? And (2) Does the military’s focus on counterinsurgency detract from other defense and security needs?

To address these issues, the seminar organizers assembled an impressive group of experts from the military, government, and academia to present their assessment of the current effort, lay out the challenges, and offer options for further increasing U.S. effectiveness at counterinsurgency. The event was not-for-attribution to encourage candid debate. This brief summarizes the presentations, arguments, and discussions at the general level without attribution to any particular speaker or participant. Professor Douglas Lovelace, Director of the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, and Dr. Peter W. Singer, Director of the 21st Century Defense Initiative at Brookings, provided introductory remarks, introduced panel speakers, and moderated the discussions.

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>JAN 2008</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2008 to 00-00-2008</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Coin of the Realm: U.S. Counterinsurgency Strategy</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 122 Forbes Avenue, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5244</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>4</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

## PANEL 1: ARE WE GETTING COIN RIGHT?

The first panel addressed the question of whether or not the United States is getting its new COIN strategy right. Dr. Janine Davidson of the Pentagon's Department of Defense Stability Operations Capabilities, Dr. Steven Metz of the Strategic Studies Institute, and Colonel T. X. Hammes (USMC, Ret.), author of *The Sling and the Stone*, set the stage for a lively discussion. Their presentations analyzed, challenged, and developed the conceptual framework and theoretical underpinnings of the current U.S. COIN strategy.

The U.S. military's emphasis on COIN raises new skill requirements. Commanders in the field, for instance, need an in-depth understanding of local power structures, organizations, and culture. The ability to establish and maintain personal relationships must be transmitted to the next generation of leaders. General David Petraeus had begun exploring ways to do that as the commander of the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center and Fort Leavenworth and is now implementing it on an even broader scale in Iraq. But transferring organizational knowledge is not easy with frequent personnel turnover. This poses an enduring challenge for the U.S. military.

When engaged in counterinsurgency, the United States focuses on restoring or augmenting the capacity and legitimacy of a partner state. Discussions at the seminar suggested that this may be inadequate in the 21st century since very few national governments in conflict-prone regions can sustain this degree of legitimacy and control. Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance, are wrought with weak central governments and internal divisions. Their national governments exercise limited authority in major parts of their territory. Subnational organizations, many built on sectarian, ethnic, or tribal lines, provide security and services, filling the void left by the weaknesses of the national governments. A counterinsurgency strategy which ignores subnational groups and seeks only to strengthen the national government may be doomed to failure. While existing counterinsurgency doctrine does not fully reflect this, military leaders and civilians on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan do. They have, by necessity, become more closely involved with subnational political and security organizations. But as the United States remains involved in counterinsurgency, it must address enduring tensions between local and national initiatives.

The state-centric approach to COIN works when there is a viable partner government truly committed to economic, political, and security sector reform and willing and able to make difficult decisions to see it through. In the 21st century, this is increasingly rare. Take Iraq. The

parties to the national government are fragmented and parochial. They do not trust each other and have more allegiance to their ethnic, sectarian, or tribal constituents than to Iraq as a whole. Afghanistan is similar. Places like Somalia are even worse—there is not even a flawed and dysfunctional government there. Given the realities and conflicts of the 21st century, state-centric approaches to COIN may be inadequate. It is not clear, though, what should supersede them.

The military component of counterinsurgency must always be balanced against and integrated with the other components. One participant argued that rather than thinking of COIN as a military activity, it should be conceptualized as a strategic communication campaign supported by a military component. Iraq is again instructive. According to one expert at the seminar, the United States has failed to develop an effective, culturally attuned narrative in its strategic communication effort. The narrative has often shifted as themes are tried, then abandoned. By focusing on the national level, it has not fully integrated local messages and priorities which have the greatest influence on the daily lives of Iraqis. And it has been hampered by perceived divergences between the American message and American behavior. The U.S. narrative says that the war on terrorism is not a "clash of civilizations," but senior officials sometimes use language that suggests that they do see it that way when addressing domestic audiences. The narrative promotes the rule of law, but to Iraqis, the United States appears to allow security contractors to operate above the law. The United States maintains what many people around the world see as illegal incarceration and interrogation programs for its enemies. The United States opposes nuclear proliferation but tolerates Israel and India's nuclear programs. The resulting credibility deficit is hard to overcome.

The conflict in Iraq demonstrates that counterinsurgency is difficult when strategic objectives change or remain unclear. It also shows that the U.S. obsession with clear metrics and indicators of success complicates counterinsurgency. Success in COIN is often difficult to measure. There are as many setbacks as victories. National level metrics may have little relevance at the local level. Local ones may vary from place to place. This means that strategic planners and policymakers may not know with certainty what works and what does not. Sustaining public and congressional support under such conditions is an enduring challenge. A seminar participant suggested that the United States also needs clear indicators of *failure* so that it can decide when it might be best to disengage. This would allow weighing the cost of continuing a COIN campaign against the desired outcome. Disengagement or changes in strategy would be easier to justify, plan, and execute if the

conditions for them were specified from the outset.

The first panel stressed the need for a whole-of-government approach to counterinsurgency. Jointness must become seamless interagency cooperation. At this point, most of the effort expended on reviving U.S. counterinsurgency capabilities has been within the military, and at the tactical and operational levels. There is no framework for a whole-of-government approach (although efforts are under way). If successful, this should facilitate strategic communications and local narratives.

## STRATEGIC AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

During lunch, Dr. Conrad Crane, lead author of the Army/Marine Corps Field Manual 3-24 "Counterinsurgency," discussed the genesis of the new doctrine and criticism of it. He identified seven ideas that have emerged from security scholars and experts: (1) the doctrine is wrongheaded because only brutality can quell an insurgency; (2) the doctrine should focus more on the enemy; (3) the doctrine is irrelevant because contemporary internal wars may include elements of insurgency, but are not, strictly speaking, insurgencies; (4) the doctrine reflects 20th century insurgencies more than contemporary ones; (5) for a range of social, political, and military reasons, the United States cannot execute the doctrine; (6) concentrating on counterinsurgency will cause the U.S. military to lose skills essential for conventional warfighting; and (7) the doctrine undervalues the contributions that technology can make to counterinsurgency.

Dr. Crane also suggested future issues that must be addressed if the United States is to become more effective at counterinsurgency. First, we need a national security strategy that explains why counterinsurgency is important and when the United States should undertake it. We need to continue development of joint doctrine and concepts that reflect the realities of the contemporary security environment. We need more effective ways of encouraging partner states to undertake serious and sustained reform. And we need to better understand the concept of transnational insurgency.

## PANEL 2: TOO MUCH COIN? BALANCING COIN WITH OTHER NEEDS

The afternoon panel included Colonel Robert Killebrew (USA, Ret.), defense consultant, former Deputy Director of the Army After Next Project and former U.S. Army War College faculty member; Michele Flournoy, President and co-founder of the Center for a New American Security and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense; and Lieutenant Colonel Ralph

Peters (USA, Ret.), author of *Wars of Blood and Faith: The Conflicts That Will Shape the 21st Century* and many other books and articles. The presentations and discussions addressed balancing counterinsurgency with other defense capabilities.

The current environment puts many demands on the U.S. defense establishment: defending the homeland; conducting the broader war on terrorism; undertaking stability operations and addressing state failure and ungoverned spaces; preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD); traditional deterrence and force projection; and humanitarian intervention. There are few instances of a conflict involving a single type of threat. Instead, every operation involves multiple threats and requires a broad range of military capabilities. Counterinsurgency must be approached in this more complicated and multidimensional context.

COIN operations, in particular, demand capabilities which are in short supply including Special Operations Forces, translators, cultural experts, military police, and engineers. These low-density, high-demand capabilities still need to be expanded. In addition, significant shortfalls exist in important nonmilitary capabilities dealing with governance, reconstruction, economic development, civil society building, policing, and intelligence. While these are best provided by agencies other than the military, it is sometimes forced to undertake them. The broader strategic issue is whether American security is best promoted by having the military fill this enduring capability vacuum, or by augmenting nonmilitary agencies and departments.

The United States needs an overarching strategy and operating principles for counterinsurgency. It requires a whole-of-government approach which does not yet exist. Even the military is not fully committed to transforming for the COIN mission. As the Army and Marine Corps increase in size, they simply will add more units of the existing types. This may not increase overall effectiveness at counterinsurgency. Procurement also continues to follow traditional patterns with only small shifts in response to COIN needs. When the budget supplementals shrink or end, it is not clear which programs will survive.

The strategic context of counterinsurgency is vitally important. Early intervention or preventative measures offer the best chance of success at an acceptable cost. When considering involvement in counterinsurgency, the United States must decide not only when to intervene but also how. Should it be only with allies or unilaterally if no allies step up?

History suggests that outsiders are most effective at providing counterinsurgency support to local partners rather than controlling the operation themselves. Local forces are better rooted in society, enjoy more legitimacy,

and are more knowledgeable in the local customs and geography. A counterinsurgency campaign designed and led by local forces will often avoid inspiring nationalistic resistance. The problem is, though, that most insurgencies are components of civil wars, so local security forces may be seen as oppressors by some elements of the population. American planners must be sensitive to this and aware that U.S. forces may be seen as more unbiased and protective of the rights of the population than local security forces. Planners must also work with America's partners to assure that local security forces are representative and respectful of human rights.

The U.S. military is still searching for ways to train and assist partner militaries better, without eroding other capabilities. The issue of the optimal in-country organization for counterinsurgency support matters greatly. One participant at the seminar argued that military assistance groups under the control of the senior American civilian (usually the ambassador) should be the preferred option. This will assure that the civilian and military components of the U.S. support effort are fully coordinated. But this again indicates the need for the Department of State and other civilian agencies to increase their counterinsurgency capabilities so they can contribute to the whole-of-government approach. This is likely to require an increase in the size of the Foreign Service and the Agency for International Development (and possibly other agencies as well, such as the Department of Justice). The Department of Defense, some argued, should help the State Department in this regard, perhaps even by shifting funds to it.

There are legislative barriers to some needed reforms including the transfer of funds and the reallocation of personnel. Congress must address this. Legislative changes must also include the reform of the personnel management system among both civilians and the military. The current structure does not take full advantage of existing COIN skills. Individuals often do not pursue certain job options which might limit their future career advancement. The Army's Foreign Area Officer Program, for example, is not perceived as career enhancing since it takes those who participate away from the sort of troop and staff assignments that promotion boards prefer. If the United States is to be more effective at COIN, the personnel management systems must be redesigned to generate the needed skill sets.

Speakers and participants challenged many of the underlying assumptions that have shaped the efforts to augment American counterinsurgency capabilities. For instance, one argued that the old mantra that COIN is 20 percent military and 80 percent political can be misleading if it is interpreted to mean that 80 percent of those involved should be civilians. While only a political

solution can end an insurgency, the bulk of the U.S. effort in terms of personnel and expense may be military.

The seminar participants noted that the emphasis on counterinsurgency runs counter to some of the central ideas of defense transformation. It has been based on the assumption that quality and technology can substitute for quantity. The two are fungible. As a result, the U.S. military has been reduced in size and the number of weapons platforms has been cut. While units and platforms are, on an individual basis, more capable than they were 2 decades ago, there are fewer of them. The quest for efficiency has led to a loss of depth in both manpower and equipment. As Iraq is demonstrating, this makes it difficult to undertake manpower-intensive, protracted counterinsurgency operations. And even if quantity and quality are fungible in conventional warfighting, they may not be in counterinsurgency where presence on the ground and sustainment of protracted presence matters more. Given this, the United States needs to rethink or adjust the transformation process if it intends to become more effective at counterinsurgency.

The panelists and participants were also concerned that the U.S. military might go too far in its shift toward counterinsurgency. Clearly this has tangible and opportunity costs. The key is to balance counterinsurgency effectiveness with other defense imperatives, make sure that force development reflects national strategy, and seek the maximum overlap between the capabilities needed for counterinsurgency and other military missions.

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